

## COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 25, 2004

### MCLAUGHLIN RESERVE ACQUISITION

File No 04-011

Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to the University of California Natural Reserve System to acquire the Aikawa and Escobido properties, 40 and 35 acres respectively, in Napa County.

**LOCATION:** Adjacent to the U.C. McLaughlin Natural Reserve lands and contiguous with the Bureau of Land Management's Cache Creek Natural Area Bureau of Land Management's Knoxville Recreation Area in Napa County.

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

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#### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Location Map

Exhibit 2: Site Map

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

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#### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160 –31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to the University of California Natural Reserve System (“UCNRS”) for the acquisition of fee title the Aikawa and Escobito Properties (Assessor’s Parcel Numbers: 015-010-014; 015-010-013; and 015-010-012) located in Napa County, more particularly described on Exhibit 2 of the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds UCNRS shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):
  - a. All relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to, appraisals, agreements of purchase and sale, hazardous materials assessments and documents of title.

- b. Evidence that UCNRS has paid no more than fair market value for the property acquired, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
  - c. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation.
2. UCNRS shall agree in writing to maintain and operate the property in a manner consistent with the purposes of natural resources, open space and agricultural protection and public access, for the lesser of twenty years or the date that the property is transferred to another public entity approved by the Executive Officer.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, regarding the Conservancy’s mandate to address the resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$150,000 to the University of California Natural Reserve System (UCNRS) for the acquisition of 40-acre Aikawa and 35-acre Escobido properties. The Conservancy’s action would allow UCNRS to acquire fee title to the two properties and integrate them into the existing McLaughlin Reserve, in Napa County.

These properties are important to the Reserve because of their outstanding geological and biological diversity. They are composed of a mixture of serpentine and non-serpentine habitats and lie within an area that forms an ownership gap between two sides of the Reserve. If left in private ownership, these properties would probably be developed for residential use, which would destroy important habitat (*e.g.*, by diverting water from natural seeps and springs for domestic use) and reduce the conservation value of adjacent Reserve lands, particularly through development of a (currently unused) easement that crosses the Reserve. Acquisition of the properties will aid in the management of the Reserve by allowing for control or eradication of invasive species at a watershed scale, whereas continued private ownership provides a refuge for invasive species and future residential development would likely cause introduction of additional invasive species.

The purchase of these two properties will help UCNRS in a larger effort to close an ownership gap the between sides of the McLaughlin Reserve (Exhibit 2). The outcome of this effort, which consists of a combination of land acquisitions and cooperative agreements with the Bureau of Land Management, will be the establishment of a contiguous land area exceeding 8,500 acres that is managed in a way consistent with the UCNRS mission. This mission is to contribute to the understanding and wise management of the Earth and its natural systems by supporting university-level teaching, research, and public service. This proposed Reserve expansion will facilitate research by providing better opportunities for landscape scale studies. It will facilitate education and public outreach by allowing the development of extensive routes for guided interpretive

hikes. It will also facilitate good stewardship by allowing resource management (especially control of invasive species) at the watershed scale.

As with the rest of the McLaughlin Reserve, the acquired parcels would not be open to unrestricted use by the general public due primarily to the need to provide research sites free from potential disturbance. However, the McLaughlin Reserve Managers are committed to providing high-quality educational public programs at the Reserve. These programs include outings organized by groups such as the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, California Native Plant Society, and Land Trust of Napa County, as well as programs organized by the Reserve Managers. This year the McLaughlin Reserve has initiated a public lecture series, which brings in speakers from a variety of disciplines (ecology, geology, anthropology, history). Lectures at the field station are followed by hikes or outings. Acquisition of the Aikawa and Escobido properties would allow for the establishment of an interpretive tri-county hike (through Lake, Napa, and Yolo counties) which would sample some of the most striking examples of the landscape heterogeneity created by the Stony Creek Fault along a spectacular plateau separating the Putah and Cache Creek watersheds. This hike would be a cooperative venture with the Morgan Valley Ranch, which is adjacent to the Reserve.

**Site Description:** The project site consists of two properties: the 35-acre "Escobedo Property" and the 40-acre "Aikawa Property." The properties are situated adjacent to one another and to the McLaughlin Reserve at the north end of Napa County (Exhibit 1) at an elevation of 2,100 to 2,400 feet. The two properties adjoin the McLaughlin Reserve to the west, the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Cache Creek Natural Area on the north and east, and the BLM Knoxville Recreation Area to the south (Exhibit 2). The area is part of a larger habitat and open space preservation initiative known as the Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partnership.

These properties are located between the two unassociated segments of the McLaughlin Reserve and include some upper tributaries of Hunting Creek (part of the greater Putah Creek watershed), which runs the length of the Reserve from northwest to southeast. The integrity of the Reserve as a research site requires that the upper Hunting Creek watershed and the intervening lands between the disconnected reserve segments are managed in a way consistent with the Reserve mission. The acquisition of the project site is key to securing this integrity.

The project site lies along the Stony Creek Fault, an ancient subduction zone which separates the marine sedimentary deposits of the Great Valley Sequence from the ultramafic rocks (serpentine, serpentinitized peridotite, gabbro, and basalt) of the Coast Range Ophiolite. The geologic heterogeneity associated with the Stony Creek Fault and the biodiversity that it generates are among the outstanding features of the McLaughlin Reserve that contribute to its value as a site for research and education. Together, the Aikawa and Escobedo Properties contain high geological and biological diversity, with patches of blue oak woodland, cypress stands, serpentine chaparral, non-serpentine chaparral, serpentine grasslands, and serpentine seeps all juxtaposed within 75 acres. Several of these plant communities contain species that are restricted to serpentine in this or other regions, and the seep on the Aikawa Property provides habitat for four plant species (*Delphinium uliginosum*, *Helianthus exilis*, *Mimulus nudatus*, and *Senecio clevelandii*) that are also listed as "of limited distribution" by the California Native Plant Society (CNPS 4). The project site also provides habitat for foothill yellow-legged frogs (*Rana boylei*) and sage sparrows (*Amphispiza belli belli*), which are listed as species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game.

The Aikawa and Escobido Properties are undeveloped, except that the Aikawa Property has a small man-made pond and a rough graded road leading partway into the property. Otherwise, the properties show little evidence of human impact. Historic land uses have been limited to low-intensity grazing, and consequently the plant communities, including the grasslands, are dominated by native species. Notably, the project site is at the margin of a recent invasion of goat-grass (*Aegilops triuncialis*), which is centered on the McLaughlin Reserve about 1/4 mile to the west. Containment of this invasion is a priority management goal for the Reserve, and the project site would be central to any eradication effort.

**Project History:** The McLaughlin Reserve was established in 1993, after Homestake Mining Company approached the UCNRS with a unique proposal to establish an environmental field station at their McLaughlin Mine. In winter 2002, the Reserve was expanded dramatically when Homestake ended operations at the mine permanently, and management of nearly 7,000 acres was transferred to the University and the Land Trust of Napa County. In addition the University received Homestake's 5,000-square-foot administration building for use as a field station.

Interest in acquiring the Aikawa and Escobedo properties started in fall of 2002, when the newly hired McLaughlin Reserve Managers set a goal of ensuring the integrity of the Reserve by closing an ownership gap between two sides of the Reserve. At this time the properties were on the market and several other parcels in the area had been developed with residences and small vineyards. Negotiations were carried on by the UC Real Estate Services Group, and in spring 2003 the sellers removed the properties from the market pending an offer from UC and agreed to pay for appraisals that would meet Conservancy and University requirements. These appraisals were completed in July 2003, and the sellers agreed to sell for the appraised value. A grant from the Coastal Conservancy will allow UCNRS to complete the purchase of these two properties in fee.

This project is similar to acquisitions that the Conservancy has funded at the nearby University of California, Quail Ridge Reserve on February 22, 2001.

#### **PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$150,000
UCNRS (in kind)	<u>15,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$165,000</b>

UCNRS will facilitate the transfer and the in-kind costs above are their estimate of the cost of preparing the real estate negotiations, appraisals and related documents and in an agreement reached with the owners in 2001. The acquisition would be funded by the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002" (Prop. 40) which is intended for use in acquiring, restoring, and enhancing the state's wetlands and watersheds.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project would be undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code; in particular, Sections 31160-64, Chapter 4.5, *San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program*, because it would aid in the protection, restoration and enhancement of natural habitats and connection of corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional importance (§31162(b)).

Under §31162(b), the Conservancy may award grants to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional significance. Acquisition of the properties as described above would protect habitat and open space of statewide significance and ensure that these properties are not lost or degraded through development or use. Further, protection of these properties will contribute to the ecological integrity of the entire natural lands area and ensure integrated management of the area. Maintaining the properties in open space would also protect the scenic views to and from the property.

Consistent with §31162(d), the McLaughlin Reserve public access and education programs will enhance educational opportunities accessible to urban populations within the Sacramento area and Bay area.

Consistent with §31163(c), the Coastal Conservancy's assistance in this project supports the inter-agency actions and public/private cooperation that is critical to the continued preservation and use of the McLaughlin Reserve for education and research.

The proposed project is consistent with §31163(d) in the following respects: (1) the project is supported by the Napa County General Plan; (2) the project involves multiple agencies including its research and education programs which serve a regional need; (3) the project can be implemented in a timely way since agreement with the landowners has already been achieved; and (4) financial and technical assistance is being provided by the UCNRS to maintain the properties.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH STRATEGIC PLAN:**

Consistent with San Francisco Bay Area Program **Goal 10, Objective A**, of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will result in acquisition and enhancement of 85 acres of resource lands that connect existing public lands to provide larger contiguous blocks of habitat and wildlife corridors and preserves scenic vistas and open spaces.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

##### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** The proposed use of the two funding sources is consistent with their intended purposes. Funds to be appropriated from Proposition 40, the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002" are intended for use in acquiring, restoring, and enhancing the state's coastal wetlands and coastal watersheds.
3. **Support of the public:** See Exhibit 3. Letters of support have been received from Assemblywomen Pat Wiggins, the Land Trust of Napa County, and also neighboring landowners: the U.S. Department of the Interior-Bureau of Land Management and the owners of Morgan Valley Ranch.

4. **Location:** The subject properties are located in Napa County adjacent to the McLaughlin Reserve, and adjacent to the Bureau of Land Management's Cache Creek Natural Area and Knoxville Recreation Area. This area is in watersheds that drain to the Delta and Suisun Bay and within one of the nine counties in the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program jurisdiction.
5. **Need:** To date the grantee has invested hundreds of hours of staff time in negotiation and support of this acquisition. The grantee does not have access to capital outlay funds for acquisition.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The McLaughlin Reserve receives national and international interest as a research site. The proposed acquisition will contribute to the University's research into the unique natural resources that survive in this area. Research and stewardship opportunities are not restricted to U.C. students, but involve scientists from the California State University system, as well as numerous private institutions.

#### **Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** UCNRS has obtained a commitment from the land owners to sell to the University based on the University's assurances of obtain grant funding in a timely manner. The land owners do not wish to retain the parcels, and had already put them on the market when the University initiated negotiations 15 months ago. The sellers will likely put the parcels back on the market if the University does not complete the transaction in the near future.
9. **Leverage:** The Conservancy's \$150,000 contribution for purchase of the subject properties will be matched with the grantee's contribution toward the project in terms of staff time, appraisals, and related real estate document preparation and future site management. In addition, the grantee is working to secure an additional 60 acres adjacent to the subject properties.
10. **Conflict resolution:** If the owners had not agreed to sell the properties to the grantee, then the land would eventually be sold to private parties for development of residences or vineyards, which would conflict with the needs and objectives of land preservation for species protection at the McLaughlin Reserve.
11. **Innovation:** The McLaughlin Reserve in itself is an innovative venture, arising from a partnership between industry (Homestake Mining Co. of California, a subsidiary of Barrick Gold Corp.), academia (University of California), and a grass-roots conservation group (Land Trust of Napa County). The proposed acquisition is part of a larger expansion plan that will build upon this cooperative model of land management by including a partnership with the Bureau of Land Management. A direct outcome of the proposed acquisition will be a joint venture with the privately held Morgan Valley Ranch to provide interpretive hikes through the acquired parcels and surrounding area.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee has completed has all necessary steps for acquisition and the sellers are willing and eager to complete the transaction. Once the transaction is complete, the land will immediately become part of the Reserve.
15. **Cooperation:** The grantee has received Conservancy grants for projects in the area such as Quail Ridge Reserve Land Acquisition, Phase I and II (January 2000 and February 2001) and has a very good record of working in cooperation with local, state, and federal agencies in order to preserve and restore natural habitats. The McLaughlin Reserve Managers work

closely with staff from the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Fish and Game, Bureau of Reclamation, and other Blue Ridge / Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partners in an effort to integrate management practices at a regional scale. For example, the McLaughlin Reserve has partnered with DFG to eradicate tamarisk from Knoxville Creek, and to write a management plan for the Knoxville Wildlife Area, adjacent to the McLaughlin Reserve.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325 as a transfer of ownership in land to preserve open space and habitat. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.